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Some Constraints on Change in Eastern Europe

Not so many years ago, when “de-Stalinization” and “de-satellization” seemed to be the order of things, the horizons of change in Eastern Europe appeared virtually unlimited. Indeed, one elaborate political science treatise, published in 1967, purported to discern two “irreversible trends” throughout the area, an increase in pluralization within individual countries and the tendency of the European Communist states to become more European and less Communist.¹ Nowadays, in the continued aftermath of the massive Soviet intervention to reverse the changes actually undertaken during 1968 in Czechoslovakia, such certainties have all but disappeared. Yet, as Professor Korbonski’s timely and stimulating discussion reminds us, there is no logical reason to suppose that Communist societies are immune to change. With respect to Eastern Europe, however, as Professor Korbonski also notes, the hazards of forecasting are truly formidable. We simply do not yet possess any really adequate, comprehensive conceptual framework with which to interpret the present stage of East European political development, much less to attempt to predict the future. The intrinsic difficulties of theory-building are compounded by increasing national and even systemic differentiation within the area and, no less important, by the intractable problems posed by the role of the Soviet Union. With these and other caveats fully in mind, Professor Korbonski nonetheless ventures a guarded hypothesis: most East European countries will move toward “pluralist evolution” and “technological adaptation.” Although I do not regard this supposition as at all implausible, in the comments that follow I shall try to get at some of the assumptions that underlie Professor Korbonski’s hypothesis and thus also indicate some of the factors that may inhibit its full realization.

Let me, however, begin with several critical observations on the methodological eclecticism that characterizes Professor Korbonski’s discussion. In view of the current state of the discipline (or should one rather say, the art?) of comparative Communist studies, a pluralistic approach or, better yet, one aiming at some theoretical synthesis seems highly desirable. But, by that very token, the rigid separation of “endogenous variables” from “exogenous factors” strikes me as unwarranted because it is rather unrealistic. It may well be true that the whole question of the Soviet role in Eastern Europe merits a separate

1. Ghița Ionescu, *The Politics of the European Communist States* (New York, 1967), pt. 4: “Two Irreversible Trends,” pp. 271–90.

treatment of its own, but I should have thought that one ought to have begun with this line of inquiry rather than concluded with it as almost an afterthought. Furthermore, if Soviet influence—to different degrees, to be sure, in individual East European countries—bids fair to continue to be a major factor for the foreseeable future, does it not also qualify as an “endogenous variable”?² This is an absolutely crucial and eminently practical point to which I shall return subsequently.

Even accepting, for a moment, the compartmentalization of approaches as presented, other problems and pitfalls may occur. This is especially true with respect to the attempt to apply concepts and analysis derived from the now vast political science literature on modernization and development in general to the particular case of Eastern Europe. In the first instance, there is a critical distinction between modernization as a finite phenomenon and political development, properly conceived, as an ongoing process and a persistent challenge. Communist systems may experience great success in the former without necessarily mastering the latter.³ One ought not simply to assume what remains to be proved. Then, too, more confusion than clarity may be engendered by indiscriminate application of specific categories of developmental “variables” and “crises.” Thus, as concerns Communist political systems, it is highly doubtful that “nation-building” necessarily precedes or even accompanies “state-building.” Rather, in most if not all instances, the order of priorities has been just the reverse.⁴ And can one confidently assume that Communist “nation-building” has really been completed throughout Eastern Europe? Apart from the rather special case of Yugoslavia, where the disintegration of what R. V. Burks once characterized as Communist “multi-ethnic nationalism”⁵ now seems well advanced, doubts can be raised not only about East Germany but also, for example, concerning Poland, where the gulf between the *pays réel* and the *pays legal*, although perhaps narrowed under Gierek, has yet to be fully bridged. The problem of proper terminology becomes especially acute with respect to the concept of “participation.” Much of the political science literature on develop-

2. In view of his kind comments on my “Is Mexico the Future of East Europe: Institutional Adaptability and Political Change in Comparative Perspective,” I hope Professor Korbonski will forgive me for pointing out that he seems to have overlooked the fact that my analysis was not restricted to domestic variables but also sought to include the role of the Soviet Union as a factor setting Eastern Europe quite apart from Mexico.

3. This point has been well argued by Zvi Gitelman, “Beyond Leninism: Political Development in Eastern Europe,” *Newsletter on Comparative Studies of Communism*, 5, no. 3 (1972): 18–43.

4. Cf. Kenneth Jowitt’s discussion of “system building” and “community building” in his *Revolutionary Breakthroughs and National Development* (Berkeley, 1971).

5. R. V. Burks, *The Dynamics of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Princeton, 1961), pp. xxv ff.

ment may well be faulted for blurring the distinction between genuine participation from below and manipulated mobilization from above,⁶ but that failing scarcely helps advance matters. It is a safe bet that all ruling Communist elites are fully cognizant of the quite basic practical distinction between participation and mobilization, and so, too, is the critical intelligentsia throughout Eastern Europe. In sum, one may wholeheartedly agree with Professor Korbonski that intellectual inertia and professional conservatism on the part of specialists in the field of Communist studies who cling to outmoded concepts ought to be loudly decried, wherever it may still exist. But misinterpretations from this source can all too easily be replaced by misconceptions that arise from the otherwise commendable effort to integrate Communist studies with more inclusive perspectives on comparative politics, particularly when this effort is accompanied by a wholesale borrowing of general theoretical constructs, unhoneed against empirical data from the actual experience of Communist regimes.

To put the matter somewhat differently, we might ask ourselves the rather elementary question: What difference does it make that the East European political systems whose future we aspire to probe are Communist regimes? Clearly, it has made an enormous difference in the past with respect to the strategies selected and the resources employed to achieve modernization.⁷ And it will probably continue to make quite a lot of difference for the future as long as what is at stake is the "leading role of the party," with all that is implied in practical political terms by that orthodox ideological-political watchword.

Consider, for a beginning, the matter of the officially enshrined ideology. Ideological agnosticism may indeed be widespread throughout Eastern Europe (and in the Soviet Union, for that matter, although to a far lesser extent), but, precisely for that reason, one ought to be very careful about jumping to premature conclusions concerning the "erosion of ideology" as a practical political force. Much more to the point is the transformation of the function of ideology from a motor driving the revolutionary transformation of society into an instrument for national and social discipline⁸ and, no less important, the ultimate rationale for the preservation of the specially privileged political position of the party against the aspirations and demands emanating from transformed society. Even given this changed function, it should be obvious that ideology still remains inextricably linked to power. As such, however

6. For a critical discussion along these lines, although in slightly different terms, see Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review*, 64, no. 4 (December 1970): 1033–53.

7. Cf. Richard Lowenthal, "Development vs. Utopia in Communist Policy," in Chalmers Johnson, ed., *Change in Communist Systems* (Stanford, 1970), pp. 33–116.

8. Cf. Richard Lowenthal, "The Soviet Union in the Post-Revolutionary Era: An Overview," in Alexander Dallin and Thomas B. Larson, eds., *Soviet Politics Since Khrushchev* (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), pp. 7–9.

much it may be doctored (for example, by the admixture of nationalist motifs as in Rumania), ideology continues to inhibit the development of genuine popular participation, and it also serves as a formidable obstacle to the emergence of a truly viable "subsystem autonomy" as well as a major check against the emergence of any fully institutionalized pluralism.⁹ As long as the Soviet Union persists in its own dogmatic ideological orthodoxy of recent years, that can only serve to strengthen the hold of conservative forces and thus also to reinforce the limits on change in Eastern Europe.

Much the same set of considerations seems to apply to the prospects for technological adaptation. The need to move at least part way in this direction is doubtless quite clearly perceived by most if not all East European ruling elites. Furthermore, as Professor Korbonski persuasively argues, it is probably mistaken to regard the East European bureaucracies as either monolithic in character or necessarily conservative in outlook. Increasingly these bureaucracies have undergone internal differentiation, and their ranks now contain innovative elements. But for all the career advancement and increase in social stature on the part of the latter elements, there is as yet no conclusive evidence, *at the top level of national decision-making*, of technological adaptation, as Professor Korbonski purports to see it "manifested in the ascendance of technocrats at the expense of ideologues and [conservative] bureaucrats." Furthermore, the commonplace juxtaposition of "experts" and "reds" may oversimplify a much more complex reality. To a certain extent cadres of *both* denominations are still vitally needed for different, although—in the eyes of the top leadership—complementary purposes. If this continues to be the case, the very strains and recurrent conflicts between different species of subelites can only serve as a brake on technological adaptation in policy as well as personnel terms. The willingness of the ruling elites to co-opt technical expertise ought not to be confused with any readiness to surrender basic political prerogatives, as the case of East Germany should demonstrate.¹⁰

What, then, of the ruling elites themselves, the "middle-of-the-roaders," as Professor Korbonski labels Gierek, Honecker, and Kádár in particular? They and their immediate entourage and probable successors in the future are likely to find themselves in the unenviable position of being cross-pressured by divergent and largely unaggregated domestic demands on the one side and Soviet restraints on the other. It is precisely in this connection that the ex-

9. Much of the recent discussion about pluralism in Eastern Europe and, even more, the Soviet Union has been marred by the tendency of some Western analysts implicitly to ascribe to various social and occupational groupings representative and institutionalized characteristics that they simply do not yet possess.

10. *Pace* Peter C. Ludz, whose impressive *Parteielite im Wandel* (Cologne and Opladen, 1968) exaggerates the notion of the younger, technologically oriented specialists as a "counter-elite."

ternal "parameter" of Soviet influence ought to be viewed as an "endogenous variable." In a very real sense, the ruling elites in Eastern Europe must operate simultaneously in two separate but—from the point of view of the personal political fortunes and the national futures involved—closely linked political universes. These are, of course, the individual domestic milieu and the larger international system over which the Soviet Union still enjoys hegemony. Albania and Yugoslavia have been cases apart in kind and Rumania one in degree. But for the ruling elites in all the other East European countries there are powerful pressures, both subtle and not so subtle, personally to internalize Soviet norms or, at bare minimum, carefully to weigh possible Soviet reactions to their own internal policies and domestic political development. As long as the Soviet Union tends toward "oligarchic petrification" or even if it develops some novel variant in a quest "to combine ideological rigidity with technological expertise"¹¹ in part out of security considerations, including a concern to preserve Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe, the repercussions for East European political development can only be negative.

All of this is not entirely to rule out *some* progress in individual instances toward either pluralist evolution or technological adaptation or both; it is, however, to suggest the existence of real limits on the extent to which processes of this sort may be allowed to develop.¹² A basic problem confronting even the most reform-minded ruling elites in Eastern Europe remains the nagging uncertainty arising from the ultimate unpredictability of Soviet reactions to domestic innovation.¹³ As long as this continues to be the case, there is bound to be considerable insecurity and thus a great premium on playing it safe. These reflexes, in turn, contribute to strengthening the hand and enhancing the political influence of conservative elements (the professional ideologues, the security forces, and the like) at home. By contrast, it goes almost without saying that should the Soviet system itself turn innovative, or should the Soviet connection come uncoupled or even be substantially loosened, the entire picture could change dramatically. Unfortunately, neither the present Soviet domestic scene nor the current shape of European international politics justifies any such expectations.

In his concluding remarks, Professor Korbonski echoes John Montias's exhortation that we strive to increase our factual knowledge about various processes within individual East European countries in order to construct a paradigm more reliable than any presently available. While warmly endorsing

11. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages* (New York, 1970), p. 172.

12. Present-day Hungary, under the NEM, seems to constitute a case in point.

13. For a discussion of the changing "rules of the game" which have made for unpredictability, see Zvi Y. Gitelman, *The Diffusion of Political Innovation: From Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union*, a Sage Professional Paper (Beverly Hills and London, 1972).

that eminently sensible suggestion, I would also like to call attention to Dankwart Rustow's admonition that the "long road to a theory" of Communist political change should take account of the "margin of human choice" and "clarify the choices in that margin,"¹⁴ and—I would emphasize—the constraints.

14. Dankwart A. Rustow, "Communism and Change," in Johnson, *Change in Communist Systems*, p. 358.